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Book review

Socialism and Democracy

- Reviews section -

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Let me first thank Jet for having read the book and written this review. By doing this in English, she threw the book in the midst of a debate that is raging internationally in the left, thus amplifying my voice far beyond the audience the book was originally meant for. I have great doubts whether the book deserves this attention. But I can only thank her for giving me the occasion to explain some of its central ideas to an English-speaking audience

The book appeared in a very precise context: it was published in a self-managed way and on a limited number of copies for a public that mainly consists of the (small) radical left in Flanders. It particularly aimed at triggering a debate and stimulating the imagination of fellow activists to rethink what socialism can mean in the twenty-first century. Talking about a socialist society is not an evident thing in a country where the 'left' - greens, social democrats and anticapitalist left together - obtains less than a quarter of the votes, and where conservative and neoliberal versions of nationalism are thriving. However, a number of interesting initiatives recently arose in Flanders, in particular the so-called 'Round Table of Socialists' which last year organized a 'day of socialism' that gathered about 800 people from all radical left currents, for a full day of debate about the meaning of socialism today. Similar initiatives are planned in the future. The book 'Socialism and Democracy in the 21st Century' was launched on this very day, and contained a number of (unfinished) reflections I developed throughout years of experience in the Belgian section of the FI.

Contrary to what Jet suggests, it is not at all a book about strategy. It is not conceived as a contribution to the strategic debate as it has been conducted in *Critique Communiste*, *Contretemps* etcetera. It rather attempts to re-envision or re-imagine socialism as such, namely as a fight for a radicalization of democracy. Of course, strategic issues cannot but be addressed within such a framework, but, as Jet has rightly stated, the book's reflections on strategy remain limited and undeveloped. The chapter on strategy takes only 29 pages out of 269. It contains a number of generalities, without going into detail. But the essence is there, according to me: the fact that the realization of socialist democracy requires an institutional rupture with the existing state (a state of exception), the role of the party, the revolutionary crisis (as thought by Lenin), the role of dual power, the problem of elections etc.

That many parts of the book are not particularly original is a legitimate critique. One of the aims of the book was to introduce a number of debates that have taken place in the Fourth International and in the international left in general to a Dutch-speaking audience. Due to the rather low level of the intellectual and political debate in the left in Flanders, these debates do not filter through at all here. The book was an attempt to address this lack. It draws inspiration from the work of Daniel Bensaïd, Catherine Samary, Ralph Miliband, Ernest Mandel, the recent debates about socialist democracy and about market and planning etcetera. It has been particularly influenced by the fascinating work of Antoine Artous, which I think deserves much more attention that it currently does. Furthermore, it attempts to mobilize ideas of Etienne Balibar, Claude Lefort, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Rancière and a number of other authors for an anticapitalist perspective.

Socialism and democracy

The book is grounded in a reflection on the sources of the socialist critique of current society. To put it schematically: it aims to go beyond 'scientific socialism' (which grounds its critique on scientific insights about the inner contradictions of capitalism) and 'ethical socialism' (which criticizes capitalism on normative grounds) and to develop what one might call a 'political socialism'. With the latter term, I mean a socialist critique of capitalism which focuses on the way capitalism deals with 'the political'. In an attempt to avoid complex philosophical debates, one could bluntly define 'the political' as a symbolic order which acknowledges the realities of conflict, decision, power and contingency. These realities are often obfuscated by the way capitalism functions, and this is deeply problematic from a democratic point of view.

The kind of political socialism which the book defends attempts to provide an immanent critique of the historical 'democratic revolution', which opened a space both for 'the political' and for its obfuscation through the workings of capitalism. The thesis of the book is that socialism can best be thought of as an intervention within this contradiction.

It attempts to radicalize (the logic of) the democratic revolution far beyond the limits that capitalism imposes on our current, limited type of democracy, and to politicize ever new spheres: the economy (through class struggle), the household (through feminism) etc. In a way, this breaks with a number of classical Marxian conceptions: rather than being a society where the political nature of the state has disappeared, socialism should be an attempt to take 'the political' fully serious. That is also why socialism is so closely linked to democracy (which can be defined as the attempt to find a form that takes 'the political' most fully into account).

Capitalist society, in contrast, engenders a number of depoliticizing tendencies which fundamentally undermine democracy. The book deals with these at length. It attempts to show for example how commodity fetishism can be understood as a form of depoliticisation, how fashionable notions such as governance undermine the political, how neoliberalism naturalizes the economy and conceals its contingency, or how the market undermines pluralism and conflict.

Confronted with this, class or feminist struggles are not merely struggles against a concrete enemy (the bourgeoisie, patriarchy), but they are perhaps first and foremost struggles on a metalevel: they are struggles for the recognition that there is conflict in the first place. They are struggles for the political, i.e. for the acknowledgement that the economy, the household etcetera are places characterized by conflict, decision, power and contingency. That is why these struggles are of fundamental importance to democracy. "There is a war between the ones who say there is a war and the ones who say there isn't," Leonard Cohen once sang. This is the kind of war that socialists wage. Throughout the book, I develop a kind of ideology critique that is based on this fundamental idea. I think it constitutes a starting point for thinking about the emancipatory struggle for an 'other', socialist democracy.

Emancipatory struggles are always asymmetrical to an extent: they are struggles between politicization and depoliticization. Such an asymmetry appears on different levels: while the Marxist 'critique of political economy' (at least in its non-dogmatic or scientific versions) attempts to uncover the underlying political nature of the economy, neoliberal public choice theories try to give an economic account of politics. While financial markets function in such a way as to make sure that 'there is no alternative' (Thatcher), Socialists try to show that there is contingency, and that a number of strategic options remains open.

The fact that socialist struggles are so closely linked to a democratic logic is most obvious when we look at the nature of the extraparliamentary power of capital and labour. Labour's extraparliamentary struggles necessarily take a political form, as they always create new public spheres through collective action: in a strike, the street or the gate of the factory become a public sphere of debate, conflict and the formulation of ideas. Capital's extraparliamentary force, in contrast, consists of closing off public spheres, by threatening with delocalization, by lobbying behind the scenes, by closing factories whose workers are to combative.

Socialist struggles extend the political, and therefore the democratic logic, to new spheres, and fight against the bureaucratization (which is a form of depoliticization) of the state. The general thrust of the book is that socialism can be said to constitute a radicalization of the democratic revolution rather than a rupture with it. One of the 'symptoms' of this is that almost all concepts we currently use to think about politics were first or most saliently coined during the long period around the French Revolution. Think about popular sovereignty, human rights, constituent power, citizenship, popular surveillance, etc.

Jet's objection to this does not really provide a response. Of course, there have been many other revolutions where

important ideas have been developed. Many socialists have developed all kinds of new interesting theories and insights. But the fact remains that for political theory, the French revolution remains a crucial reference point. I only found two concepts that were developed within the broad socialist movement after the period around the French revolution : self-management (coming from the anarchist tradition), and hegemony (developed by Gramsci), both of which are of course absolutely crucial for thinking about democracy.

But for the rest, all socialist theories of democracy are but recombinations and redefinitions of previously existing fundamental political-philosophical and juridical concepts. It is often said for example that one of Marx's contributions to democratic thought was his advocacy of the possibility to recall elected representatives. However, it is often forgotten that it was Condorcet who first developed such a conception. I contend that this genealogy of political concepts has a relevance if we want to think about the place of socialism 'in history' and its relation to the democratic revolution.

The rupture between the democratic revolution on the one hand, and feudalism and absolutism on the other, is much more fundamental and complex than many Marxists have recognized, although, under capitalist conditions, I repeat, this revolution has not been able to fully realize its potential. It is the crucial challenge for socialism to go beyond its limits. Generally speaking, the democratic revolution constitutes a double rupture with absolutism. On the one hand, it breaks with the symbolic logic of absolute monarchy, where the monarch is seen as the representative of god on earth. It thus creates a space of contingency which is a precondition for democracy.

On the other hand, it fundamentally changes the institutional principles governing the state (at least in theory). While absolute monarchy was based on the principle of venality (the possibility to sell public offices to noblemen) and on taxation as a means of political accumulation, modern democracy (however bourgeois it is) is based on totally different principles: the state is no one's property, public offices are not for sale (at least in principle), and political governors are institutionally separated from economic exploiters (although, of course, they are related to them by all kinds of political and ideological ties).[]

However critical we may be of 'bourgeois' democracy, a number of these principles that are fundamental for creating a public sphere, cannot easily be dismissed. There ought to be more continuity between socialism and the logic of the democratic revolution than many classical Marxists have admitted. Our challenge is to think about a rupture with capitalist society by making use of the classical political concepts, rather than assuming it will be possible to create a society that will be based on fundamentally different principles which we cannot think yet now.

Strategy

As Jet said, the chapter on strategy has its limits. It is mainly concerned with giving some outlines of the ongoing strategic debate and showing the relevance of the foregoing reflections on democracy for thinking about strategy. Perhaps more than other parts of the book, this section is written with the Flemish situation in mind. The first concern of the left in Flanders, according to me, should be to try to regain the initiative in the political sphere, and to make the opposition between left and right visible again, against dominant nationalist discourses. Before intervening in ongoing struggles with an (actualized) version of a transitional program, making a left 'camp' in society is of foremost importance.

There are radical left groups that think they should intervene today with a so-called transitional program based on nationalisations under worker's control and the like, but that remains strictly propagandistic (which has its value, but only a limited one). The real question is through what initiatives and with which demands we can again create a space or a camp of the left. The tradition of thinking about transitional demands, which I otherwise fully endorse,

does not help us so much in solving this particular question.

It could perhaps be predicted that many people would focus on the discussion on the state in the book. Contrary to what Jet suggests, I don't think the book underestimates the weight of bureaucracy and the importance of the struggle against it. However, I do think that a visible and contestable 'place of power' is inevitable in any democratic society, and that this is a crucial element of the modern state, even in future socialist societies.

In general, Marx and Engels' statements on the state are problematic to say the least. The focus on self-management is also not really convincing: of course, self-management can replace bureaucracy in the exercise of a number of organizational functions. But it cannot replace the need for a central place of power (a place where the sovereign people appears through several kinds of representations). In that sense, I remain fundamentally indebted to Claude Lefort (Antoine Artous is one of the very few Marxists who has understood what is at stake here; see his recent excellent book 'Citoyenneté, démocratie, émancipation').

There remains a need for a central place of power from where a given territory is governed and through which society can gain its self-understanding. The existence of such a place is a precondition for democratic contestation and conflict. This does of course not mean that 'this place of power' should be structured and organized in the way it is now (the struggle against bureaucracy and the state's separation from society therefore remain actual).

As is explained in the book, self-managed councils can only partly fulfill this function. To the extent that they are not based on general citizenship on a given territory but are grounded on productive structures and workers agency, they simply fail to create a place where the people can be represented and become the object of contestation. This does not mean councils are to be dismissed, but as the book explains, they should have a place next to democratic institutions of a more parliamentary type in a kind of bicameralism (which is an idea that several fourth internationalists have already defended, so it is certainly not very original).

In general, I very much agree with what Jet says about Allende and Chavez (whom I do not defend at all in the book: it contains very few references to Chavez; but to what other contemporary experiences can we refer if we want to make a theoretical story somewhat more lively?). She is also right in stating that I insufficiently discuss the role of state repression and violence, and that the focus remains too much on the national level (contrary to what Jet suggests, however, I do discuss the problem of the bureaucratization of the labour movement in chapter II). These are certainly shortcomings of the book.

Of course, they are crucial issues (especially the question of globalization and of how we can realize socialism internationally in the current circumstances, and the relevance of past experiences), but I am perhaps not capable of saying something really interesting about them now. They would certainly require another book, or even several books. [] Especially the role of elections and the formation of a leftist government within a revolutionary process remain a difficult puzzle, and I cannot claim to have a solid position on this question for the time being (in the first place for lack of practical experience and of real, practical involvement in such processes and debates).

To the extent that violence is discussed in the book, it is to unmask the enormous limits the capitalist state has in dealing with democratic contestation. When this state takes recourse to violence and repression, it gives up the remains of the democratic principles on which it claims to be based. Therefore, democracy is at our side. That is the red thread of the book. I am convinced that such a self-understanding will make socialists much stronger in the confrontation with state repression than the sterile attempts to create 'good Bolsheviks' who are prepared to violently create a dictatorship of the proletariat. The latter discourse is a recipe for political marginalization in the first place.

It is a pity that Jet ends her review with a suggestion that I uphold 'reformist or left-reformist illusions'. I know some people tend to search for the fundamental political and theoretical grounds for why I am no longer a member of the Belgian section of the FI, while my reason for leaving the section is simply that (particularly) its Flemish wing has simply become unworkable due to a seemingly irresolvable internal crisis and an unwillingness to genuinely face it. The book is certainly an attempt to go beyond forms of sterile dogmatism and certain forms of 'trotskyist' political correctness that I consider irrelevant in the Flemish context. But I could not possibly have written it without the solid political education and experience I enjoyed within the FI, whose project I fundamentally still support.

[] This analysis is based on the seminal recent work of Benno Teschke (*The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics and the Making of Modern International Relations*, 2003), which goes beyond the work of Anderson that Jet cites.

[] My proposal to those who attempt to write such a book would be to reflect very well on the notion of history that is presupposed in discourses on 'the lessons of history'. However interesting past experiences (from 1917 to Allende) are, history does not teach lessons. It is much more complex than that.